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# Adapting to Conflict: Rhetorical Refusals of Scientific Publication Norms

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**ABSTRACT:** In the early decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the central role of technical writing to organizational communication during crisis and conflict events is becoming increasingly apparent. Meanwhile, the documentation involved when currently publishing studies of such communication suggests a negotiation site for expectations and genre conventions within scientific discourse.

**KEYWORDS:** crisis, conflict, negotiation, publication, discourse community, style guides, technical communication, proposals, prospectuses, organizational culture

## 1. BACKGROUND: INTERSECTING SCIENTISTS, TECHNICAL COMMUNICATORS, AND READERSHIPS

Scholarship in the technical communication field is populated with watershed studies of crisis and conflict events, in particular the manner by which they are calibrated by scientific discourse (e.g., Winsor, 1988). Unfortunately, there continue to arise many opportunities for the field to perform studies of crises and conflicts within scientific contexts. Jinbong Choi and Wonjun Chung's (2012) study of Toyota's 2010 massive vehicle recall due to faulty gas pedals, for instance, focused on the company's apology communications associated with the recall—and the 52 associated deaths (p. 4).

Studies regarding science communications specifically in engineering could include the influence of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers during Hurricane Katrina, the birth of tsunami engineering following the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, and unforeseen events occurring as a result of construction engineering projects that are transforming ecosystems such as the Everglades.

During the process of writing a book series prospectus and style guide focusing on technical engineering communication during times of crisis, conflict, and transformation, my series co-editor (a colleague in the professional/technical communication field) and I found these documents to be energizing opportunities to negotiate with our publisher the normed expectations and genre conventions representative of scientific discourse. The publisher is known for its special focus on engineering communications, and particularly engages as its readership professional engineers and other engineering practitioners, faculty, and technical communicators.

### *1.1 Brainstorming*

Broadly conceived, the book series prospectus described potential titles that would center on engineering subfields and contribute to technical communication's focus on the relations among phenomena in contact zones: "[S]ocial spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, [including] as they are lived out ... today" (Pratt, 1991). Particular frameworks were forecasted as bearing out the series focus:

- (1) Exploration as to how technical engineering communication is highly kairotic and thus requires responses determined largely in the moment. The concept was incited by other disciplines' discursive handling of crisis communication topics—which often may be characterized as essentialized how-to lists for composing industrial press releases and public relations texts in reaction to crises.
- (2) Recognition as to how globalization and evolving technologies have transformed traditional communication methods. As such, an instrumental, skills-based approach to exploring crisis communications even more so may not account for key factors affecting the success of a communication, and may underestimate the importance of organizational culture, diversity within a targeted audience, and collaborative communication teams distributed but technologically linked across geographic locations.

A series with these technical and professional communication frameworks, we felt, offered an opportunity for a publisher attentive to industry writers and current discussions and concerns raised on practitioner listservs and blogs.

The audiences and aims of the series were to familiarize teachers and advanced students in technical writing and sister disciplines with these fields' current theory, research, and practice in crisis communication, insofar as the role of contemporary professional and technical communication—given writers' expertise in audience analysis and message circulation when composing appropriate responses—calibrates crises and transforms public and industry viewpoints post-crisis. Series titles would achieve these aims, we argued, by reframing discussions as to how conflict, crisis, and adaptation, as tropes, raise the stakes for communications in professional and technical contexts.

### *1.2 Drafting: Compartmentalizing Engineering Science and Its Communications*

During conceptualization of the series project, differences were manifested between the series editors' and publisher's understandings of prospectus and style guide genres; these could be considered disciplinarily cultural. Science communication conventions had powerfully normed publisher expectations for the prospectus and style guide; meanwhile, as editors our focus was on technical communicators' rhetorical use of science discourse as compared to other fields' discursive approaches to the topics of crisis and conflict. As a result, surfacing our respective discursive values informed the majority of publisher-editor conversations during the process of drafting the documents.

Compared to what we editors believed to be the book series' topical niche, the kairotic, in-the-moment considerations when composing technical communications during crises, requested prospectus revisions often included the compartmentalizing of engineering communications, and recasting the prospectus' discussion of informed communication decision-making as replicable tips for discursively responding to crisis events.

For instance, the initially submitted prospectus described the series as including topics on engineering

- (3) elements, or how engineering genres are being transformed in the 21st century, as engineering disciplines rapidly evolve due to scientific breakthroughs, and
- (4) techniques, or composing strategies of engineering communication in terms of their role in conflict, crisis, and, subsequently, social transformation.

It was expressed that elements and techniques suggested soft skills and they be reconceptualised in the prospectus' next iteration. One encouraged revision was that each title proposed for the series be classifiable as either "conflict-specific" (focusing on, e.g., disputes surrounding engineering projects associated with the Bureau of Indian Affairs), or "communication type-specific" (e.g., a body of engineering communications with a particular social justice purpose) (personal communication, October 23, 2012).

Broader cultural factors additionally can be argued as undergirding the publisher's and editors' respective disciplinary philosophies when it came to the issue of discursively labeling and containing the prospectus' ideas. Sociologist Kenneth Thompson (1998), regarding crisis communications as a hallmark of the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (and prompting him to term the era as "the age of moral panics"), argued that public discourses regarding crises tended to "look[ ] backwards to a golden age of moral certainties...[,] a return to a basic set of rules, in the style of the Ten Commandments" (p. 4)—reminiscent of the compartmentalization the prospectus was expected to display. This tendency, Thompson explained, could be viewed as the outcome of a perceived "laxity" (p. 1) and "fragmentation" (p. 3) of mores across social and economic contexts, and a "rapidity of social change and growing social pluralism" (p. 11), complicated by a tendency for "contemporary panics ... to catch many more people in their net [as opposed to being scapegoated upon one discernible population demographic]" (p. 2).

### *1.3 Drafting: Negotiating Generalization with Localization*

As said, another proposed framework of the series concerned the evolving role of technical communicators during crisis and conflict events as partially impacted by networked technologies, including emerging diversities consequential to networking. As Liza Potts (2013) demonstrated in her analysis of "experience architects'" actions during the unfolding of disaster events, "single-serving interfaces, systems, documents, and silos ... were not built to move information across systems, [but] participants [implicated in disasters] invented connections in order to find and share information" (p. 1). Social media systems, Potts explained, have rendered those whose expertise was once defined along disciplinary lines as now needing to willingly "span multiple technologies, people, and organizations" (p. 2)—an evolution that, particularly during the exigency of crisis events, consequently blurs the norms often attributed to "humanities" versus "science" discourses.

As one exercise of emerging diversities afforded by globalization, in her study of 25 communication professionals Maria de Fatima Oliveira (2013) regarded cultural diversity not as traditionally conceived along demographic lines, but as "the potential *behavioral* differences among group members in relation to other ethnic groups" (p. 257, emphasis added). The author argued that crisis communication studies' responsible understanding of culture identity must distinguish and recognize the intersection between cultural diversity and cultures' globalization, so that a principal investigator(s) may best discern how an audience's response

to crisis communications is, at times uniquely, “based on a deeply interconnected web of cultural values and traditions” (p. 256).

Meanwhile, the drafting process of our series’ style guide, which significantly borrowed from boilerplate, required inclusion of the following:

Sweeping statements about any group of people, no matter the context, will not be allowed. Such language has no place in [this publishing house’s] publications. The [publisher’s] Editors reserve the right to reject a book or to nullify a contract should an author be unwilling to make required changes of this type.

As such, while drafting we editors needed to ensure that overall the guide both supported and qualified this statement. The guide needed to unmistakably prohibit stereotyped labeling and other disturbing language use in series manuscripts, yet recognize that a potential title might focus on the localization often necessary when a piece of technical communication is globally distributed. In a technological and international era, with its emerging diversities and evolving mediated communication forms, the act of localizing a technical text may be a profoundly contextual one; without sufficient, and occasionally elaborate, direction from our style guide, a title’s manuscript could fail to provide sufficient rhetorical analysis of localization and be regarded as ethnocentric.

## 2. GENRE AS A MOVING TARGET: IMPLICATIONS

The inspiring discussions between the publisher and series editors, as we collaborated to revise two genres typical during the publication process, pose more than a unique circumstance. The factors involved more largely represent how rapid change in the nature of technologically and globally linked work may reshape communication conventions within and across disciplinary cultures.

### *2.1 Negotiating Genre: Form and Content*

John Swales’ influential *Research Genres: Exploration and Application* (2004) demonstrates how genre is one embodiment of disciplinary sites of discursive negotiation, and how arbitrating generic convention can be as much stimulating as stilted. To Swales, the problem is that manifestations of genre, and by extension the many approaches (including metaphorical) to understanding genre, now are so various that “defining genres in terms of communicative purposes” may no longer be productive during the composition process (p. 68):

How do we know at the outset of building and studying a corpus, which of the texts or transcripts belong in genre A and which in Genre B (or to neither) when we are unlikely to know at that outset what the “real” communicative purposes of those texts are? Surely all we have in the beginning stages are overt features of form and content. (p. 69)

One answer to Swales’ question may be seen in Natasha Saje’s (2005) analysis of philosophies regarding the balance between form and content that are available to a writer composing along generic lines. Saje regards “pluralism” as the lens most helpful in synthesizing or perhaps exploding the commonly perceived binary between form and content, in particular as it is perpetuated by “dualism” and “monism” lenses. As she explains, the dualist belief that “there are different ways of saying the same thing,” for instance that “a sentence can be paraphrased

and not lose its message,” sustains the distinction between form and content (p. 46). Monism, she describes, fuses form and content into an inseparable relationship, but in doing so nonetheless upholds the boundaries between the two concepts, as a monoist lens focuses on how a text as whole represents form and content’s mutual influence (p. 47). A pluralistic approach, Saje argues, is more amenable to composing with rhetorical sensitivity; the interaction of form and content is not understood via a fixed, whole text, but in the interaction’s varying manifestations throughout the text (pp. 47-8).

## 2.2 *Negotiating Genre: Promoting Agility and Transfer*

Agility with shifts and even vagaries during the composing process is encouraged in the professional/technical communication discipline, understandable given the field’s rhetorical focus on context. More to the point, and similar to our editorial situation when collaborating with the publisher, technical communicators who are cross-trained among several discourse communities may possess the ability to spot what otherwise might be unquestioned, tacit norming of generic convention. In her study of organizational genres, Rebecca Pope-Ruark (2008) pointed out that professional writers (as opposed to “professionals-who-write” [p. 186]) who are not members of an organizational community nonetheless may exhibit as much rhetorical awareness and successful use of genres as that of the community’s members. Pope-Ruark’s observation of writers contracted to marketing agency clients revealed that the “intercommunity relationships” writers negotiated between the larger marketing industry community and agency clients’ organizational communities enabled the writers to migrate among, and mine knowledge and experience from, the communities in order to successfully compose genres (p. 190). Compared to genre theories that predicate a writer’s rhetorical ability upon his/her thoroughly assimilated membership into a discursive community, Pope-Ruark’s study suggests that a writer’s successful use of genre also can be achieved by toggling among community boundaries, accordingly shifting identities, to achieve several communities’ shared goals during the composition process (p. 191).

Habituated to journeying among discursive contexts, professional/technical writers can bring their disciplinary and experiential cross-training to bear during collaborative composing situations. Although speaking of first-year composition (FYC), Elizabeth Wardle’s (2009) exploration of FYC curricula as compared to writing performed within other university disciplinary contexts may be viewed as applicable to the editor-publisher case described in this text: “FYC is radically different ... in its use of *writing as the object of primary attention rather than as a tool for acting on other* objects of attention” (p. 766, emphasis added). This approach to writing, among other things, promotes an understanding of genre of fluid, in that it is the product of context-specific constraints:

Genres arise when particular exigencies are encountered repeatedly; yet each time an exigence arises, people must be attuned to the specifics of the current situation in order to employ the institutionalized features of the genre effectively—or, in some cases, throw them out. (p. 768)

Wardle points out, though, that this understanding of genre does not exhibit a strong tendency to transfer to disciplinary writing situations beyond first-year composition and English studies coursework, stating that “transfer ... depends on the presence of affordances for transfer being present in the next situation” (p. 770). Indeed, a professional listserv thread contemporary to Wardle’s work indicated in other disciplines a preoccupation with freezing generic

conventions. Regarding her experience with (non-FYC/non-English studies) academic departments that teach communication, for instance, one writing program director's comment contemporary to Wardle's piece asserted, "Far and away the greatest concern was with conventions and genres in the business world, including everything from the memo to the report" (Goldschmidt, 2008).

### 3. CONCLUSION

For those of us straddling discursive and organizational communities, where a piece of communication such as a discernible genre becomes a site of negotiation among writing collaborators, professional/technical writers may facilitate the composition process by revealing how generic conventions are arbitrarily normed rules with powerfully silent value systems. We editors found such discussions with our publisher to be invigorating, resulting in prospectus and style guide documents that honor the priorities of scientific discourse while enabling our series authors to explore key phenomena in crises and conflicts.

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